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SUBJECT: USAID/OFDA FIELD REPORT AGADEZ: POST-FLOOD EMERGENCY
RESPONSE AND CHALLENGES

REF: NIAMEY 00639

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SUMMARY

1. In the wake of September 2 flash floods affecting the city of Agadez and nearby rural communes of Dabaga, Tchirozerine, and Tabelot, representatives from USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) and the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) conducted a joint assessment of current assistance and flood damage. The September 22-24 visit found that at present, response efforts appear to be meeting the basic humanitarian needs of the 850 displaced families in Agadez city. Although gaps remain, the population of approximately 42,000 urban flood-affected appears out of immediate danger.

2. Government of Niger (GoN) security restrictions outside Agadez seriously hinder the provision of assistance in Dabaga, Tchirozerine, and Tabelot rural communes. The GoN's short-term focus on relocating displaced families out of schools and directive style in doing so is resulting in compartmentalization of responses and has stalled the humanitarian response in the initial emergency phase. Near-term priorities include the expansion of humanitarian assistance to populations not yet supported and the provision of more flexible assistance to urban populations allowing the resumption of livelihoods activities. END SUMMARY.

SEPTEMBER 22-23 FIELD ASSESSMENT

3. Prompted by conflicting reports regarding flood-related humanitarian needs and adequacy of resources mobilized for the response, USAID/OFDA and ECHO representatives conducted a joint assessment from September 22-24. The team of two regional advisors

met with U.N. and non-governmental organization (NGO) staff, local officials, and flood-affected families residing in displaced sites in Agadez city. The team also met with Niamey-based NGOs and U.N. representatives of agencies involved in flood assessment and response. The USAID/OFDA-ECHO mission had no access to flood affected areas beyond Agadez city limits due to security concerns and the GoN requirement of military escorts accompanying travel outside Agadez.

FLOODING AND RESPONSE TO DATE

¶4. Flash flooding in the early morning of September 2 destroyed the Alarces dam 7 km northeast of Agadez city, creating a powerful water flow that destroyed houses along a former riverbed by a wave reportedly two meters high. Local residents indicated that the September 2 flash flooding was the most devastating flood event experienced since 1974. Floodwaters flowed along a 150 km path starting in the Air Mountains above Tabelot, 140 km northeast of Agadez, and affecting Tabelot, Dabaga, and Tchirozerine rural communes before reaching Agadez city. Mayors north of Agadez quickly communicated the impending disaster through cell phone calls to colleagues, facilitating life-saving evacuations of households in the flood waters' path.

¶5. Post floods, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OHCA) reported two fatalities and one person missing. The GoN estimates that 79,000 individuals or nearly 12,400 households are affected. (Note: U.N. agencies and NGOs working in the area believe the GoN's flood-affected figures overestimate actual numbers. Given that the Governor rejected initial estimates from OCHA and Nigerien Red Cross assessments, however, humanitarian actors refer to the GoN figures in order not to delay provision of

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assistance. End note.)

¶6. Based on discussions with OCHA, NGOs, and a U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) team that conducted a September 14-16 assessment in flood-affected areas, humanitarian needs outside of Agadez city revolve around restoring agricultural production. Requests for assistance are to reclaim heavily silted gardens, re-stock 3655 livestock lost by 301 households in floodwaters, and repair 3336 damaged or silt-filled wells prior to the upcoming agricultural season, for which planting should begin in early October. To date, security-related issues are hindering provision of assistance. (Note: A U.N. security team currently is assessing areas outside Agadez that have been insecure and a "no go" zone for the last two years due to conflict between Tuareg rebel groups and the GoN, reported landmines, and banditry. End note.)

ASSISTANCE WITHIN AGADEZ

¶7. The GoN estimates that within Agadez city approximately 6,500 families are affected, totaling nearly 42,000 individuals out of an urban population of approximately 130,000. Approximately 850 displaced families are sheltering in public buildings, of which 731 are being relocated from schools into two new temporary sites. Authorities and humanitarian agencies were preparing the new sites with additional tents, latrines, and water points during the USAID/OFDA-ECHO assessment. A third site has been identified, but is likely not viable due to being outside of town and beyond the city water system. In general, women and children are sheltering in the temporary sites while men choose to stay near their damaged or destroyed houses.

¶8. The team visited several of the 16 distribution points. In one site, registered beneficiaries were receiving tickets for food distributions planned for the next day. At another location, the French Red Cross had placed water bladders and latrines directly in communities. The regional stadium, which is currently housing 96 families, will be the main site for flood displaced relocated from schools. At the stadium, the team observed distributions including

plastic sheeting, buckets, soap, kitchen sets, blankets, and other essential items provided by the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF). Mercy Corps staff reported having identified a few flood-affected families living off-site that have not yet received support. Based on the GoN's estimated numbers, the U.N. World Food Program (WFP) is ensuring food for all 79,000 flood-affected during September and October.

¶9. The emergency assistance mobilized to date by local authorities, donors, and international relief agencies appears to be meeting the most basic humanitarian needs of the flood-affected populations in Agadez, and they appear to be stable. The team noted gaps in assistance, particularly the need for more flexible assistance that would allow flood-affected families to resume livelihoods. OCHA is present to facilitate humanitarian coordination between international agencies, displaced and local authorities. Challenges to coordination include compartmentalized GoN sub-committees that currently are focused exclusively on a narrow range of temporary short-term solutions, and little international agency access or involvement in the key decision-making ad-hoc committee, which closely holds information and authority. (Note: The OFDA-ECHO team heard from the U.N. Resident Coordinator after returning to Niamey that the GoN has decided to bulldoze the Agadez city areas affected by flooding. No one in Agadez, whether humanitarian agency or displaced who are already rebuilding on sites of their former homes, seemed aware of this decision. End note.)

TWO FACTORS TO CONSIDER FOR TRANSITION SUPPORT

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¶10. December and January are cold months in the Air Mountains. The GoN envisions displaced families staying in current temporary sites for the next three months, the end of which coincides with the onset of the cold season. Despite recent extremely wet weather, both the 2008 and 2009 growing seasons have been severely affected by drought, resulting in serious deficit agricultural and fodder production. Thus, facilitating agricultural production for the upcoming short season in tandem with forward planning for the upcoming cold season are essential to helping these affected populations avoid renewed food insecurity and health issues.

OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

¶11. There are two primary obstacles to the provision of effective flood relief, which, conversely, also present opportunities. The first is lack of access to affected populations outside of Agadez due to GoN security restrictions stemming from the conflict between the GoN and Tuareg rebel groups that started in early 2007. The second is the absence of leadership to consider a wider range of longer-term options for flood-affected populations, in order to help them relocate, restart livelihoods, and quickly move towards more permanent solutions beyond sheltering in displaced sites. On return from Agadez, the USAID/OFDA-ECHO team met with the U.N. Resident Coordinator in Niamey to raise these two issues for UN attention and a higher level of leadership and intervention. The U.N. Resident Coordinator was aware of both issues and actively engaged in seeking new solutions.

USAID/ OFDA AND USG ASSISTANCE

¶12. In response to the U.S. Embassy's disaster declaration on September 16 (reftel), USAID/OFDA provided \$50,000 to support cash for work activities that will improve sanitation and hygiene in Agadez city. The USAID/OFDA acting Regional Advisor stationed in Ouagadougou mobilized ECHO, which is the other major humanitarian donor present in the region for this joint assessment. Following the joint mission, both offices anticipate providing modest additional humanitarian assistance in affected communes and are coordinating closely for the maximum impact of any additional

assistance. The USAID/OFDA regional office in Dakar will continue to monitor post-flood transition in conjunction with the U.S. Embassy in Niamey, USAID/West Africa, USAID's Office of Food for Peace, and humanitarian partners.

¶13. Note: OFDA drafted this report; Embassy Niamey clears and thanks OFDA for its responsiveness in dealing with this emergency situation. End note.

WHITAKER